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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an alternative art education methodology grounded in feminist emancipatory epistemology and poststructuralist theory. The paper takes a short journey through the author's research, touching on concerns about epistemology and methodology, and by looking more closely at the application of discourse analysis to the research data. It concludes by addressing implications for art education curriculum. (Contains 22 references.) (BT)

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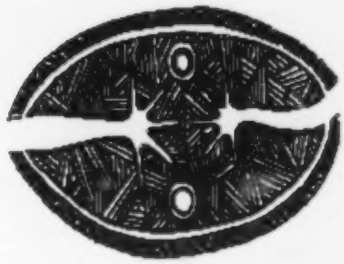

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"A More Relevant Art Education Methodology for the 21st Century"

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A MORE RELEVANT ART EDUCATION METHODOLOGY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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Introduction

Research into a culture as complex and transitory in nature as ours at the current time requires alternative art education methodology. In this paper I describe a methodology grounded in feminist emancipatory epistemology and poststructuralist theory. I intend to achieve this by taking a short journey through my own research, touching on concerns about epistemology and methodology, and by looking more closely at the application of discourse analysis to the research data. In conclusion implications for curriculum will be addressed.

Historically, art education research has roots in the positivist, quantitative methodology of psychology (Lowenfeld, V and Brittain, W. L. 1982; Wilson, M and Wilson, B 1982; Parsons, M. J. 1987). In an attempt to come to terms with the cultural context of contemporary research problems, art education research today has moved towards processes that better reflect this complex, ever-changing, pluralistic context. There is value in the contribution of traditional social science methodologies and subsequently a multi-disciplinary approach to investigations of art, culture and education. Of particular value are feminist approaches in addressing the crucial role of gender, the partiality of knowledge and the marginalisation of groups in society.

In my doctoral research, I sought to examine the educational, social and work experiences of nine women and to document their formative life experiences as artists. I found that while there had been considerable work at the level of theory and practice in understanding the broad, systemic influences on women in the visual arts, there has been much less research on the effects on individual careers, values and lives. The aim of the research was to examine how the women in the study perceived their positions as women negotiating careers in the visual arts in Australia, as well as how they positioned themselves with regard to the subjectivities of art student, artist, teacher, life partner and mother. As an art educator, I was interested in relating women's work experiences in the visual arts to their educational experiences. Conclusions drawn from the study would then suggest directions for curriculum innovation in art education.

The questions for my research arose out of the theories of exclusion from cultural production addressed in the literature review and an insight that women did not always appear to be aware of discriminatory practices that impacted upon them as artists. The questions were structured to examine what could or could not be said by the women about women's art practice in Australia. How the women understand their careers and lives, how they perceived their positions in relation to the dominant discourses, and how they arrived at the personal subjectivities which they describe, are all questions arising out of a need to explain how women negotiate careers in the visual arts. Using the notions of the constitution of the subject in discourse, of agency and self-reflexivity, and the capability of subjects to contest and restructure discourse as a means to social struggle (Fairclough 1989, 1992; Giddens, Beck and Lash 1994), I was able to develop a conceptual framework in which it was possible, first, to formulate these questions and, second, to guide the interpretation of the data.

The purpose of the study was to generate theory about possibilities for emancipatory language practice for women which will provide ways forward within the traditional institutions of art reception and art production. This purpose could apply just as well to other marginalised groups in the visual arts or in social institutions such as schools. The study aimed to add to the literature on women's careers, particularly within the visual arts and to contribute to art education literature through its expected affirmation of women's art practice and by augmenting the limited discursive and historical traditions of artists who are women. Other objectives included the demonstration of the possibilities for emancipatory action through revealing strategies that assisted women to negotiate careers as artists, teachers and academics; and provision of support for the literature of cultural studies and women's studies, in examining the position of exclusion from cultural production as experienced by women. By raising questions about gender equity in education the research explored the value of gender-inclusive curriculum in dealing with sexism in schools. And, importantly for this paper, the research set out to develop and implement a provisional methodology that could provide a more relevant poststructuralist paradigm for research in art education, visual arts and studies of careers.

It is now well accepted that the history of women as artists in Australia has provided evidence to support the proposition of women's limited access to mainstream art practice. My research explored how women understood the social and personal contexts of their art practice. It uncovered the women's perceptions of dominant discourses and how they placed themselves in relation to these discourses, and the factors they saw as contributing to their positioning. The ability to reflect on these issues and engage in understanding as well in the negotiation of new positions is termed by Lash self-reflexivity (1994: 115). The emancipatory language practice, as described by Fairclough (1989), of the women demonstrated the extent of their agency in negotiating the obstacles that inhibited their progress as women in a visual arts career. The particular concepts outlined above provided a theoretical lens for analysing the perceptions and practices of the nine women in the study. While the theoretical framework introduced here provided a novel and provisional way of coupling concepts for interpretation in the research, I was able to show that it was a valuable and productive means of conceptualising and examining the research questions.

Methodology

Feminist Epistemological Concerns

In presenting to you my arguments for a feminist poststructuralist methodology for art education research, I would like to open by briefly addressing some concerns about compatibility between epistemology and methodology. This will be followed by a number of different feminist positions on the relationship between feminism and poststructuralism.

Klein (1983: 89) sees the relationship between epistemology and methodology as a dialectic one:

...a feminist methodology can help us validate emerging feminist theory and indicate the need for modifications. The new theories then in turn are likely to pose demands that stimulate the generation of new methods.

Because traditional epistemology is gendered, the possibility of asking 'women's questions' is denied. Therefore, according to McCulloch (1994: 18) a feminist perspective is required and also a particular methodology. Klein continues (1983: 89) a feminist methodology is one which sees "reality as differentially experienced and constructed" and which "can and must differ according to the specific circumstances of our research projects".

Two major feminist epistemological concerns include those of equity (in the broadest sense) and of critiques of positivism. The notion that knowledge is a construction based on available evidence is now commonplace, as is the recognition that knowledge is fallible. In this regard, "what can be known is not absolute but relative: what comes to be known is socially constructed and therefore varies between standpoints" (McCulloch 1994: 15). McCulloch lists problems of ethnocentrism, exploitation on the basis of sex, race and class, and that of "defining others' problems for them" (1994: 15), which are fundamental concerns for feminist epistemology. The critique of positivism attacks the assumption that research can be bias-free. Klein (1983: 92) points out that the myth of "value-free, objective science" is fading even in masculinist research circles. Klein (1983: 93) also argues that new methods are required that create a holistic picture and which reflect women's realities.

Postmodernism and Feminism

The meeting of postmodernism and feminism is a nexus fraught with tensions. For feminist theory the deconstruction of female subjectivity has been fundamental in exposing the Enlightenment assumptions of the truth of patriarchy. However, Hartsock (1990) and Ransom (1993) warn that this deconstruction gives rise to concerns about the subsequent loss of the emancipatory goals of feminism because of the loss of the fixed, stable category of the subject.

Foucault's (1979) position on the self provides a valuable point of departure in considering an alternative to the Enlightenment subject. Judith Butler (in Sawicki 1994) elaborates on Foucault's view and is a useful corrective to his limited acknowledgment of agency. Fairclough (1989; 1992) puts to work Foucault's perspectives of the constitution of the subject and knowledge through proposing the notions of emancipatory discourse and emancipatory language practice. While Fairclough and Foucault do not fully concur, Fairclough introduces actual methods of analysis which allow for the empirical justification for the theory.

As outlined earlier, a conceptual framework for the study was required that would allow the examination of how the women viewed their careers as artists. In brief, concepts such as subjectivity, agency and self-reflexivity, as put forward by Beck, Giddens and Lash (1994), made a valuable contribution to the framework. These concepts are intimately related to concepts of ideology, hegemony, discourse and power. The works of Foucault, Althusser and Gramsci are drawn upon by Fairclough (1989; 1992) who also contributed through

his theory of emancipatory language practice to the theoretical framework above. As well, Fairclough (1989, 1992) provided actual methods of analysis of discourse to elucidate the life experiences of the women. Such a framework opens up new and productive avenues of interpretation.

As the complex relationship between feminism and postmodernism is open to doubts in some minds and is hotly debated by feminist theorists, it was necessary to address these debates to arrive at a tenable position for the study. Parlo Singh (1995) supports a modernist position and challenges the usefulness of poststructuralist feminist epistemology. She emphasises that the focus of the feminist project should remain on the individual - the sexed individual of humanism - as the discourses of modernism have allowed "democratic spaces from which 'Others' can speak and change practices" (Singh 1995: 201). Linda Singer (1992) also sees the relationship between feminism and postmodernism as problematic and concludes that contradictory positions limit the value of the relationship. Sawicki (1994) expresses the concern that, while women and other marginal groups are finally deconstructing and dismantling the institutions and discourses that have maintained their oppression, postmodernism is rejecting the modernist theories of the subject and emancipation, thus foreclosing on the emancipatory project (Sawicki 1994: 296).

This research was a provisional attempt to consolidate some useful strategies for the exploration of women's careers, in particular, in the visual arts. The possibility for a research paradigm representative of a more relevant poststructuralist position is an outcome of this research. Discursive analysis has proven to be a valuable method by which to access the artists' subjectivities and perceptions about their social reality, and the measure of agency that they apply to the stage-direction of their careers.

While my study acknowledged the postmodern condition and the persuasiveness of postmodern arguments on discourse and constitution of the subject, the late modern sociologists of consciousness, Giddens (1991; 1994), Beck (1994), and Lash (1994), present productive ways to theorise about how subjectivity is developed and maintained. The advantage of this theory exists in connecting individual subjectivities and institutions, and in contributing the notion of a dynamic process of maintenance of beliefs and values and of constitution of identities. Because the study explored the relationship between lived experience and discourse, constructs such as discourse, self-reflexivity and agency were at its heart.

Foucault offers a theory that bodies and sex are social constructions and are reproduced as effects of power. While adopting this view allows feminists to escape the ties of biological essentialism, it undermines their position on the subject which, to many, is still regulated by Enlightenment assumptions of agency, rationality and pursuit of freedom. Foucault's work exposes a major criticism, the dominating tendencies of emancipation and the unified subject as a prerogative of white western feminism. This criticism is justifiable as much feminist theory ignores the multiple 'subject' of women and the variable discourses of marginal women.

While Foucault provides some basis for reconceptualisation of research method, for feminists this is limited by his notion of resistance, or limited agency, his rejection of the humanist subject, and his androcentricity. Judith Butler establishes a position that reflects attention to the Foucaultian view of subjectivity, qualified by the feminist goal of emancipation as indicated in the greater agency attributed to the subject. Butler (1992: 13) argues:

...that subject is neither ground nor product, but the permanent possibility of a certain resignifying process, one which gets detoured and stalled through other mechanics of power, but which is power's own possibility of being reworked.

While Singh (1995) and Singer (1992) challenge the compatibility of postmodern theory and the emancipatory concerns of feminism, Butler's posthumanist feminist approach addresses both the costs to the feminist project of a gender-based identity politics and the limited view of agency as put forward by Foucault. She demonstrates that feminism can benefit from the liaison with postmodernism which has provided and continues to provide a critical and productive atmosphere of self-evaluation and cross-fertilisation. This position is a fruitful one for the construction of future feminist frameworks and, in particular, was valuable for the construction of the framework for my study.

I found Butler's position most valuable for establishing the conceptual framework because it allowed the investigation of questions of subjectivity, positioning within discourses, contestation of discourses and agency which were central to the research. The study was poststructuralist in that the Enlightenment view of the rational subject is rejected in favor of a view of the subject as constituted in discourse, yet retaining greater agency that Foucault is prepared to allow.

For this study I felt that it was necessary to adopt a methodology which was feminist and poststructuralist in that it puts women at the centre of the inquiry and adds the dimension of gender to the study. Such a methodology positions the researcher as a real, historical individual whose involvement in the research process contributes to the research data and is open to critical scrutiny. It connects the research to an emancipatory and transformative view of society and utilises techniques of data collection and analysis that are judged most appropriate for the empowerment of the participants.

Two Research Methods

The research problem, as I saw it, required two research methods or approaches. First, I needed to investigate the lives of the women to establish an understanding of the context in which they as artists had been negotiating careers in the Australian art world. This fieldwork involved the use of in-depth interviews to elicit the women's life histories. Second, I needed a means to describe and interpret the participants' perceptions about these contexts of practice and how they position themselves according to the dominant discourses of the social and art worlds that they inhabit. A particular kind of discourse analysis (Fairclough 1989) was chosen.

How does all this work in practice? Let us consider the following piece of interview data or 'discourse'.

However, when I began my year as a student instructor, I heard from senior women teachers who were involved in the union movement about their fight for equal pay. I heard about the unfair dismissal of all temporary teachers during the depression. Women who married were then temporarily employed and of course they all lost their jobs. When there were war-time teacher shortages, all of a sudden married women were welcome as teachers. Inspectors visited schools each year. Their opinions included the idea that once a girl became engaged she was of no use as a teacher as her mind wasn't fully on the job. An inspector once during the fifties expressed his surprise to find that Mrs So and So appeared to be more confident as a teacher than before her marriage. There was a lot of male prejudice to combat. The "Equal Pay for Equal Work" fight was long and difficult. It was so unfair that women should do the same work, often more conscientiously than men, and receive less pay.

Mrs Timmings took me to meetings of the Technical Women's Branch of the Victorian Teachers' Union (This was before the Victorian Secondary Teachers Association and the Technical Teachers Union of Victoria were established) where it was interesting to see the seriousness with which she and the other women regarded the issues of equal pay for equal work, and other problems.

It was pointed out that married men nearing retirement often had less financial problems than when they had young dependent children. Women teachers nearing retirement often unmarried were often finding extra financial burdens as they struggled to care for ageing relatives. Timmy herself looked after her elderly mother and an even more elderly aunt. She would say "I know that if I can get them both to laugh when I take them their breakfast before I leave for work they will be all right for the day".

Jenny, a retired secondary teacher, refers in depth to the discriminatory nature of industrial practices within the teaching service towards women teachers. Here the discourse of industrial relations equality is mobilised to comment on injustices in women's working conditions. Trade union rhetoric and slogans and the real life examples given by Jenny indicate an awareness and understanding of the grassroots issues of inequality and injustice that drive trade union action as a counter discourse to dominant male notions of 'natural' relations of men's and women's work.

Other positions are represented in the Jenny's account: the senior teachers' experiences which revealed the legislative injustices of the system; the school inspector's opinions which revealed the entrenched attitudes that perpetuated the injustices; and Timmy's description of caring for her elderly relations emphasising the societal expectation that women carry out the caring roles. Jenny draws on these to support her position that women were discriminated against by the industrial and social systems. In society's eyes a male was entitled to the comfort of a wife-servant as a contributing factor to his welfare and stability as a worker (Ryan 1973: 48) and this was an assumption upon which industrial legislation prior to 1972 was formulated. An example of this was the marriage bar on women public servants which was only removed in 1966. However to maintain some control, the Public Services Act was amended in 1966 to include a new provision to regulate women workers:

The Board may determine that no married woman shall occupy an office or any of the offices, included in a prescribed class of offices... (Women's Electoral Lobby 1973: 58).

Rose (1989: 124) describes the family as an ideology of economic coercion, masked by the notion of marriage as a voluntary arrangement entered into out of love, serving the purpose of providing:

vital economic functions for capitalism: reproduction of the labour force, socialisation of children, exploitation of the unpaid domestic labour of women, compensation to men for the alienating nature of their work...

Jenny is only too aware of the continuing need to fight to protect gains already made and to make more progress.

Yes the dominant male oriented culture will have to be continually challenged by women, as long as men grow up to be bigger and stronger and more assertive to preserve the status quo which benefits them. Women may keep on fighting but it would be over-optimistic to expect a final decisive victory for equality. "Equal but different".

Jenny's personal discourse demonstrates self-reflexivity in her ability to draw upon alternative discourses to counter the dominant industrial relations views of the time. Her metaphor is one of a battle or fight that is an unequal contest because of the 'weaker' position of women. The slogan, "Equal but different", indicates Jenny's ability to mobilise women's liberation discourse to support personal statements about women's position in society.

This example of analysis of data has provided insights into discriminatory practices in the teaching profession. Limited space here does not allow examples of discrimination in academia and in the training of art students. Discourse analysis provided a valuable tool to investigate a wide range of life experiences of the participating artists including not only education and workplace practices but also delegitimisation of art practice, exclusion through stereotyping and tokenism, access to exhibition opportunities, and personal relationships and family.

The design of this research project, while provisional, was able to allow for emancipatory possibilities for future research. It opened up the possibility of using discourse analysis to gain insights into the subjective lives of individuals and the discursive restructurings through which they resolve dilemmas and undertake hegemonic struggle in wider society. With this in mind future research of this kind can be seen to be emancipatory in providing tools to overcome subordination.

The extent to which the women in this study made use of creative or emancipatory language practice is an important indication as to their agency in achieving life goals. Emancipatory practices by the nine women provide an example for other artists demonstrating the possibility for greater agency and a more meaningful contribution to cultural production. This approach recognised the self-reflexivity of the women in being able to understand, manage and reorganise life situations, to reject oppressive ideologies and subvert these through alternative practices.

Roman (1992: 557) believes that alternative theory democratically and collectively produced by women can transform subordination in cultural institutions. For the women who participated in this research project, there was evidence that the process for some had been transformative.

In contributing to an understanding of how education has aided or limited the development of women who aspire to be artists, the research raised questions about gender equity in the curriculum. The recognition that the feminisation of visual arts in schools is a form of sexism is an important step in negotiating just, non-discriminatory curriculum at all levels of schooling. The experiences of the women in this study contributed to an understanding of how education has contributed to, or limited, their development as visual artists. This has strong implications for the development of gender equity in visual arts curriculum in schools. The evidence strongly supports moves towards gender-inclusive curriculum that addresses social justice concerns. The Gender Equity Taskforce (1997: 29) also supports such a position:

By working with boys and girls, separately and together, we can assist them to identify spaces and possibilities in their daily lives where gender relations can be disrupted and transformed.

A South Australian study reports that there is considerable evidence that such programs at the school and individual teacher level about gender issues do make a difference to the gender experiences of school students (Gender Equity Team 1998: 6).

In the visual arts, through critical analysis the Eurocentric male discourses can be uncovered and deconstructed providing a deeper understanding of our culture. This is of benefit to both boys and girls in that acceptance and tolerance of difference would be promoted. Deconstruction of cultural practices allows us to see the practices as sites of economic and other forms of power, with links with gender, class and race

concerns. This approach has powerful implications for gay students, students from minority ethnic groups and students from all socio-economic strata.

This provisional theoretical framework and methodology present the possibility for a more relevant poststructuralist research paradigm in art education research and in further career studies. This paradigm is suitable for research not only about women but also about other marginalised groups. It has offered new methods which, in Roman's words, reconstitute women as both subjects of knowing and knowledge (Roman 1992: 557). Further democratisation of the research process can be insured: by dissemination of the results in both art education and interdisciplinary journals, through conference presentations, by making the findings available to a wide range of people and through facilitating inclusive educational policy development.

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